

[By Jenna Pizzi](#)

Since legislation that would keep hundreds of postal facilities, including local post offices and the mail processing facility in White River Junction, from closing passed the U.S. Senate this week, the pressure to pass similar legislation has mounted in the U.S. House.

"We are going to have a battle in the House," said Rep. Peter Welch, a Vermont Democrat.

Welch serves on the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform that is charged with taking up postal reform legislation. He says that while he is in favor of passing legislation similar to the Senate version, Rep. Darrell Issa, a California Republican who chairs the committee, is strongly opposed to the Senate version.

"The chairman and other members of the committee want to impose a private sector model on the postal service," said Welch.

But Welch said he believes a private sector model alienates those who live in rural America where it is not economically feasible to access roads where so few people live.

"It would doom the commitment that we have in this country to a rural delivery system," said Welch. "This commitment that has been enduring has been an essential service to all Americans."

The legislation that passed the Senate 62-37 includes a provision that would maintain overnight mail delivery standards for at least three years and prevent the USPS from eliminating Saturday mail delivery for two years.

As per a suggestion from Sen. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., the bill also creates a special

commission to come up with new ways the postal service can earn money as it adjusts to a drop in mail volume caused by the onset of digital media such as email and the Internet.

The bill also eliminates the postal service obligation to pay into future and current retiree health benefits by approximately \$5.5 billion per year.

Another provision in the bill blocks the USPS from closing post offices in areas where broadband Internet is inaccessible or where citizens do not have access to timely mail services. There also is a one-year moratorium on closing rural post offices.

If the House passes a bill similar to the one passed in the Senate, particularly relating to maintaining overnight delivery service standards, the USPS said earlier this week it would not close the White River Junction mail processing facility, or any other processing facility in the Northeast.

"We have put very strong language into the bill which protects the postal service," said Sanders in an interview earlier this week.

The USPS also released a list of facilities, previously slated to be consolidated, that would not close if the bill becomes law. The postmaster general agreed to a five-month moratorium on closures in December to allow Congress to pass reform legislation.

The moratorium expires on May 15.

Welch, Sanders and other legislators are working to express the importance of reliable and timely service to rural America.

In the coming weeks, Welch will look to collect support from Republican representatives from rural areas as an approach to gaining support for the legislation. Many of the postal facilities on the chopping block by the USPS are located in rural parts of the country.

"We picked rural districts because they have a common interest to represent their constituents," said Welch from Washington on Thursday. "And rural America has a much greater dependency than metro areas."

A similar approach worked in the Senate, where some 13 Republicans voted for the bill, said Welch.

"The Republicans in rural districts would have more ability to break with the leadership in the house," said Welch.

Welch is urging the House leadership to take up postal reform legislation quickly so that if it requires a conference committee to sort out the differences between the House and Senate versions, which is likely, there will be enough time to pass before May 15.

"I'm sure there will be some compromise," said Wayne Martin Jr., president of the American Postal Workers Union in White River Junction, who is uneasy about what this will mean for the future of his job.

In a letter to Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-CA, on Thursday, Welch asked that the bill be brought to the House floor "as soon as possible."

"Action on postal reform is long overdue," wrote Welch, who co-signed the letter with Republican Rep. Michael Grimm of New York.

"We request that you bring this measure to a vote to avoid drastic cuts in service, layoffs and the unnecessary closure of post office and mail processing facilities," wrote Welch and Grimm in the letter.

While leadership is in charge of the calendar, Welch said it hopes that it will appear on the floor in short order.

"It is an all hands on deck situation," he said.